

Sermon: Reckoned as Righteousness

(Preached by Rev. Paul Wu at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, on February 28, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A dying man gathered three trusted friends around his deathbed, one is a doctor, one a clergyman, and the third a lawyer. The man gave each an envelope containing \$25,000 cash, and instructed that these envelopes be placed inside his coffin during the funeral. He told them that he wanted to ensure a good head start in his next life. A week later the man died. During the Wake, the Lawyer the Doctor and the Clergy each placed an envelope discreetly inside the coffin, and bid their old client and friend farewell.

Sometime later, the three met by chance in a bar to reminisce. Soon the Doctor, consumed by guilt, blurted out that there was only \$10,000 in his envelope, as he needed the remaining money to pay off outstanding bills relating to the man's care. Moved by the confession, the Clergy also admitted that he had placed only half of the cash in the envelope. He thought the whole thing about the next life was silly, so he gave the other half to a worthy charity. By this time, the Lawyer was seething with self-righteousness. He scolded the other two for their criminal behaviour, saying "I am the only one who kept the promise to our dying friend. I want both of you to know that the envelope I placed inside the coffin contained the full amount — of my personal check for entire \$25,000"

Let me put this question to you: which one of the three is righteous? or, which one of the three is more righteous than other?

Righteousness, or the state of being righteous is a relational term. It is mainly concerned with 'rightness', or being 'upright' between two parties. At the most basic and individual level, it describes the ability and the willingness to keep one's promise to another. On a wider societal scale, righteousness is measured against ethics and morality. Ethics as a commonly accept rules of behaviour, and morality as moral law given from that which is beyond us, or some would call it: from the divine.

The scenario that I just described of the Doctor the Clergyman and the Lawyer is really just a brain teaser. The doctor's action may be excused ethically, the clergyman's action may find sympathy morally, and the lawyer—well what could we say about the lawyer, except that he did not break the law—but none of them are truly righteous.

With that in mind, I would like to turn our attention to Abraham, the father of faith and the father of nations. As the father of nations, which is what the name means literally, Abraham is revered as the common ancestor of three major religions — Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. As the father of faith, Abram responded to God's call in Genesis 12:1, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you." And God gave Abram a covenantal promise that God will make him a great nation, and will bless him, and all people on earth will be blessed through him.

The Lectionary passage that we read earlier in Genesis 17 describes the third time that God reiterated the covenant with Abraham. God also confirmed that the offsprings of Abraham will indeed come out of Sarah.

I want to stress that throughout this while process, when we look at Abraham's life in its totality, he was not entirely blameless. Fearing for his own safety, twice he tried to pretend that Sarah was his own sister, not wife, just so other more powerful kings may treat Abraham more kindly. On the central issue of the offspring to Abraham, he did not demonstrate an unconditional trust in God. Rather, he listened to Sarah's counsel and produced a son Ismael by the servant girl Hagar. Even when God confirms that Sarah will indeed bear him a son, Abraham laughed and said to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (Genesis 17:17).

However, as Apostle Paul reflected in Romans 4:20, Abraham "grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God." His faith may have started strong, it waned and retreated somewhat, then it grew as God demonstrated his covenantal faithfulness repeatedly, until Abraham became "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (v.21) Being fully convinced that God can and will "give life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v.17)

It is by such faith, such growth in faith as Abraham continued to give glory to God, that his faith "was reckoned to him as righteousness", not that Abraham was righteous in his actions, not that he was observant to the Law (as God's laws and commandments had yet to be given in that time).

Abraham was reckoned to be righteous because through faith, he was in the right relationship to God.

This is where Apostle Paul brilliantly connects the faith of Abraham to us, to our own faith. It is also by faith that we come to believe in God “who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” (Romans 4: 24-25).

Therefore, it is by faith, that we are also reckoned to be righteous. Faith is a gift of God, being made right before God is God’s grace. Faith may start small or it may start strong, it may grow or it may wane, yet we trust that God will not forsake us. Just like God declares through Prophet Isaiah (49:15) “Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”

What does this all mean, you ask? Let me paint you a picture on that Day of the Lord, when we all have to stand before judgement throne. A day when our conducts, our actions, and our thoughts through life are all exposed plainly for all to see, when we know that no amount of reasonings or excuses will ever suffice before the Holy and Righteous God, A day when we are suddenly gripped by that all consuming fear of what shall become of us. Then, most graciously, Jesus our Lord and saviour stands beside us, pats us on the back and declares, “he is alright; she is reckoned to be alright!” Praise be to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.